

## Dying kids have little hope

Story and photo by

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Before I left the pediatric hospital, Gaffer Mohamad grabbed my arm and said something I couldn't understand. Dr. Ahmod Mahmad, a local doctor, stepped in and translated.

"Why wont you help my daughter?"

I didn't know what to say. All I could manage to say is 'I'll do what I can'.

The first time I met Danya Gaffer was at a pediatric hospital located in a residential area of Kirkuk, Iraq. She barley stands three feet, 11 inches tall. She has thick jet-black hair that just ever so slightly rests on her bony shoulders, which helps bring out a pure innocent look in her brown eyes. Just looking at her brought a smile to my face.

Everyday for the past two weeks I've sat in my room late at night, thinking about her. She's so innocent and untouched by her cruel surroundings. With so many innocent people killed by Saddam Hussein's regime and as a result of Operation Iraqi Freedom, does there really need to be any more?

Danya has a congenital heart defect that has left her fingertips bright blue and her fingernails disfigured. The only visible sign that something is terribly wrong. Without surgery she won't live to celebrate her 12th birthday. Her father, Mohamad, has taken Danya all over Iraq searching for someone who could help.

"All I want is for my daughter to be well and happy," said Mohamad through a translator. "I just hope help comes before it's too late."

Why can't she be helped? The answer isn't as simple as the problem and she isn't the only one. In just that hospital six other children need surgery that will either save or greatly improve their quality of life.

Since the beginning of the Iran and Iraq war the Iraqi health care system has increasingly declined in capability. The lack of resources, reliance on old-fashioned equipment, and loss of key medical personnel isn't helping the situation.

The remaining Iraqi medical system was further harmed during Operation Iraqi Freedom, said Lt. Col. John Scott, 173rd Airborne Brigade Coalition forces health team leader. Many Iraqi citizens sustained injuries, which require greater health care than what is available in local Iraqi community.

"If crucial medical facilities were available in Iraq, children like Danya could be saved," said 1st Lt. Charles Proulx, a medical officer in 1st Infantry Division, 3rd Brigade, 63rd Armored Regiment. "But getting the facilities isn't the only problem on our hand."

Looting and ransacking of the Ministry of Health and government running medical facilities created a shortage of much needed medicines, supplies, and treatment equipment.

Severely ill Iraqi's have limited access to medical treatment and medications, these limitations result in life threatening illnesses, that otherwise could easily be prevented.

A new program is giving some hope for the severely sick in Iraq.

The Official Office of Coalition Provisional Authority and the Ministry of Health are working to rebuild Iraqi health care infrastructure through the promotion of a program called, 'adopt a hospital'. Adopt a hospital urges countries and agencies to donate money and materials to help rebuild specific medical facilities.

"Coalition forces medical systems in Iraq can only assist as an immediate stabilization in emerging conditions," said Scott. "We have no facilities to diagnose and treat severely ill civilians. We're doing what we can.

Including assisting the local health officials communicate their needs to the international community. But we cannot directly provide care for these conditions."

Even before the war extensive health care was only available for those who could pay the enormous fees for such care.

In Baghdad Mohamad located a hospital that could perform the surgery but he couldn't afford it off his salary he makes as a banker, he said.

Danya is only one out of thousands of children who need immediate medical attention. So far only a hand full have been helped.

"We don't know if were going to be able to send any of these children to get the medical treatment that will save their lives," said Scott. "Were trying to do that... I'm doing all that I can, but that might not be enough."

